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ABSTRACT

This project was designed to increase student access by addressing Western states' regulations on higher education programs delivered electronically across state lines, and to develop and get region-wide agreement on basic quality standards for distance education programs. The project achieved agreement on a set of "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Higher Education Degree and Certificate Programs," now the first generally accepted basis for evaluating distance learning programs throughout the nation. This report contains the following sections: (1) Paragraph summary of the report; (2) Executive Summary -- overview, purpose, background and origin, project description, evaluation, and summary and conclusion; (3) Body of the Report -- overview, purpose, how the purpose changed during the course of the project, background and origin, project description, evaluation, and summary and conclusion; and (4) Appendices -- information for FIPSE, and copies of publications: "Balancing Quality and Access. Some Principles of Good Practice for the Virtual University" (Sally M. Johnstone and Barbara Krauth); and "Principles of Good Practice for Learning Programs" (Barbara Krauth). (DLS)

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ED 421 993

BALANCING QUALITY AND ACCESS: REDUCING STATE POLICY BARRIERS TO ELECTRONICALLY DELIVERED HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Grantee Organization:

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education
P.O. Box 9752
Boulder, Colorado 80301-9752

Grant Number:

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Project Director:

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Year 1	$73,483
Year 2	$87,025
Year 3	$85,985
Total	$246,493

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"Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs" was designed to: 1) increase student access by addressing Western states' regulations on higher education programs delivered electronically across state lines and 2) develop and get region-wide agreement on basic quality standards for distance education programs. The project achieved agreement on a set of "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Higher Education Degree and Certificate Programs." These Principles have now become the first generally accepted basis for evaluating distance learning programs throughout the nation.

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Project Reports and Products:

- Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs. A Report to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, U. S. Department of Education.
- When Distance Education Crosses State Lines: Western States' Policies, 1995.
- Distance Education: A Consumer's Guide. What Distance Learners Need to Know.
- Good Practices in Distance Education.

Executive Summary: "Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs"

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education
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Project Overview

"Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs" addressed the need to improve interstate policies related to distance education programs and the need for standards to judge the quality of such programs. The project unfolded during a period of extraordinary change in higher education in the region and nationally.

Over the course of its final year and a half, the heart of the project became the quality question: what does quality mean and how can it be addressed? Through a careful consultative process, the project achieved agreement among policy makers at state higher education agencies, colleges and universities, and regional accrediting commissions on a set of "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs." These Principles have now become the first generally accepted basis throughout the country for evaluating distance learning programs. They have been endorsed and are being used by state regulatory agencies, higher education networks, institutions themselves, and the regional accrediting commissions.

Purpose

The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications project "Balancing Quality and Access" was designed to encourage a policy and regulatory environment that would foster the delivery via technology of high quality higher education programs to students in the Western states. At the time it was conceived, the project had two principal purposes:

1. To increase student access in the West by addressing inconsistent, outdated state policies on higher education programs delivered electronically across state lines.

2. To develop and get region-wide agreement on standards for electronically delivered higher education programs.

During the course of the project, the second goal—developing useful standards for distance education--emerged as more important than the first. There were several reasons for this shift in emphasis:

- The impossibility of regulating courses and programs provided via the Internet and other electronic means became clear.

- The continuing role of the regional accrediting associations in addressing quality became more apparent.

- The Western Governors Association's initiative to develop a "virtual university" (now called the Western Governors University) re-defined the perspective of the region—and perhaps the nation—on the interstate delivery of higher education.

- In the context of the rapid changes in the environment surrounding distance education, what emerged was the need to empower learners themselves in evaluating and selecting programs offered at a distance.

Background and Origin

When the project was proposed, it seemed exactly the right time to address the inconsistent policies governing the regulation of distance education in the West. A sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure was developing in the West, but states' policies had not kept pace.

In addition, there were no standards to guide the review of electronically offered programs from any perspective. That is, neither state agencies responsible for approving programs, regional accrediting associations, institutions involved in develop programs for delivery at a distance, nor prospective students had any way to judge the quality of programs delivered through technology.

Project Description

The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications:

1. Documented state regulations and practices related to degree programs delivered electronically from out-of-state educational institutions.
2. Developed standards for distance education programs delivered via technology--the Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs.
3. Disseminated the Principles of Good Practice and gained their widespread acceptance as the basis for assessing the quality of higher education programs delivered by means of technology.
4. Focused on educating student consumers by producing two publications designed to help students know what they should expect from a distance education program they are considering.

Evaluation

Evaluation played an important part in the entire project. We established at the beginning several milestones to mark our degree of success in meeting the project's objectives. We successfully met milestones for Objectives 1 and 2, as listed above.

The milestone for Objective 3 was to "secure state-level acceptance of the standards as the basis for state agencies' review and authorization of telecommunicated degree programs." As of May 1997, eight state higher education agencies in the West had incorporated the Principles of Good Practice into their review and approval processes. In addition, the Western Governors University will require all participating institutions to indicate how they adhere to the Principles of Good Practice. Beyond our original objectives, the Principles have also been adopted by the regional accrediting community, whose Task Force on Distance Learning endorsed them, and whose member associations are now incorporating the Principles into their accrediting reviews of distance learning programs.

The milestone for Objective 4 was to "inform higher education institutions not directly involved in this project of the new standards and state requirements for delivering degree programs across state lines via telecommunications." As the project's focus changed, we altered our strategy after the second year to creating greater awareness of the issue of quality in distance education and of the Principles themselves.

To gauge our success at getting out the word, we tracked the number and source of inquiries regarding the Principles of Good Practice. The 67 requests for copies of the Principles, which continue to arrive, came from higher education institutions, research organizations, professional accrediting bodies, state departments of education, journal and newsletter editors, high schools, and individuals.

Summary and Conclusion

The central achievement of the "Balancing Quality and Access" project has been in terms of the first part of that title: quality. The "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs" offer, for the first time, a tool for assessing the quality of distance learning programs.

The Principles emerged from a Western regional perspective, but the effect of the Principles of Good Practice is being seen far beyond the western states. We recognize that these Principles are not the final answer on the issue of quality, but they provide a framework for developing the real policies that are now emerging from and reflecting a variety of specific environments. The "Balancing Quality and Access" project thus achieved an important goal by providing the basis for national agreement on what "quality" means in technologically delivered higher education.

Project Overview

"Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs" addressed both the interstate policy surrounding distance education programs and the need for standards to judge the quality of such programs. The project unfolded during a period of extraordinary change in higher education in the region and nationally. Especially important in the project's evolution was the initiation of the Western Governors University initiative, which permanently altered an interstate policy environment that was already in flux.

Over the course of its final year and a half, the heart of the project became the quality question: what does quality mean and how can it be addressed? Through a careful consultative process, the project achieved agreement among policy makers at state higher education agencies, colleges and universities, and regional accrediting commissions on a set of "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Higher Education Degree and Certificate Programs" (referred to throughout this report as "The Principles of Good Practice." These Principles have now become the first generally accepted basis for evaluating distance learning programs. They have been endorsed and are being used as an evaluative tool by state regulatory agencies, higher education telecommunications networks, institutions themselves, and the regional accrediting commissions.

Purpose

The project "Balancing Quality and Access" was designed to encourage a policy and regulatory environment that fostered the interstate delivery of high quality higher education programs delivered via technology to students in the West. At the time it was originally conceived, the project had two principal purposes:

- To increase student access in the West by addressing inconsistent, outdated state policies on higher education programs delivered electronically across state lines.

  Regulatory policies were seen as restricting students' access to programs from other states. Our goal was to obtain mutual agreement on some coordinated policies on judging and accepting out-of-state programs.

- To develop and get region-wide agreement on standards for electronically delivered higher education programs.

  There was nothing to guide the review of electronically delivered from any relevant perspective. That is, neither state agencies responsible for approving higher education programs, the regional accrediting community, institutions delivering programs at a distance, nor students considering a pursuit of their goals through distance education

had any way to judge the quality of programs.

How the Purpose Changed During the Course of the Project

As the project progressed, our understanding of the problem changed substantially. Some of this revision can be attributed to what we learned along the way, but it was principally a result of extremely rapid changes taking place in the external environment surrounding distance education in the West.

One thing that happened during the course of the project was that the second goal—developing useful standards for distance education--emerged as far more important than the first. There were several reasons for this shift in emphasis:

1. It became clear that it was impossible to regulate courses and programs provided via the Internet and other electronic means. However much state regulatory agencies would like to control which programs "take place" within their boundaries, in reality they cannot.
   The "presence" of an electronic signal, which might originate from anywhere, can really not be regulated, nor can a telecourse offered by an out-of-state institution over a local cable system. In short, the whole notion of "out-of-state" was beginning to change, and with it, the role of state agencies in protecting their citizens from poor programming and in shielding in-state institutions from unwanted competition. While it was theoretically still possible to examine and control courses and programs provided by an institution from another state if they were received at a local community college or other local site, for example, there was simply no way to exert control over most programs that a student might receive at home. State regulatory agencies were becoming much more focused on their role of consumer protection within their state than on trying to control programs coming from another state.

2. The continuing role of the regional accrediting associations in addressing quality became more apparent. Through the establishment of State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs), the Federal government was also putting pressure on accrediting groups, in part, to develop new procedures and standards. As a result, the accrediting themselves were beginning to acknowledge that they needed to find a way to gauge quality in distance education programs.

   Our initial research uncovered the continuing importance of accreditation in the interstate program approval process. In 12 of the WICHE states, we discovered, accreditation was the principal criterion for granting approval to out-of-state institutions. The accrediting community, which had just begun to face the need for specific distance education standards, embraced this project enthusiastically as a way to begin to do so. We met with directors of the accrediting groups in the West and with those on a Task Force on Distance Learning, and our tie-in to accreditation became an important part of the project—and its eventual success.

3. The Western Governors Association's initiative to develop a "virtual university" (now called the Western Governors University) re-defined the perspective of the region—and perhaps the nation—on distance education.

   What happened, in brief, is that the higher education environment in the West changed around us very rapidly. The Western Governors' Association's goal to develop a Western Virtual University fundamentally altered the direction of both interstate higher education policy and the role of electronically delivered courses and programs.

   Our original intention in the "Balancing Quality and Access" project was to develop some basic standards (or "principles"), and, having done this, to work individually with states to help them implement the Principles of Good Practice in their reviews of programs offered by both in- and out-of-state institutions. To help us determine where to begin and as part of a formative evaluation effort, we conducted a series of phone interviews. We planned to identify where each state higher education agency was in terms of endorsing and/or using the Principles. What we found, however, was that most states were looking toward the virtual university to address the issue of interstate compatibility, both in terms of technology and policy. The virtual university is intended to broker throughout the West courses, learning modules, and complete degree programs provided both by traditional institutions and companies and, eventually, to award its own credentials based on assessments of learning outcomes. It thus represents a radical approach to eliminating all barriers to the interstate sharing of educational resources in the West.

4. Given the rapid changes in the environment surrounding distance education, it became clear that we needed to empower learners themselves in evaluating and selecting programs offered at a distance.

   Empowering the learner is, finally, the only real way to ensure that higher education programs delivered via technology are of high quality. In a non-regulated environment, students must ask the right questions and make sure they get satisfactory answers. Recognizing this, we responded to a previously unseen potential for the Principles. We realized that the Principles could help prospective students identify the kinds of questions they might ask of programs and institutions from which they might pursue a degree.

Background and Origin

When the project was proposed, it seemed exactly the right time to address the inconsistent policies governing the regulation of distance education in the West. A number of western states, including Alaska, Hawaii, Utah, North Dakota, and South Dakota had developed telecommunications networks specifically to serve citizens in outlying areas. Others, including California, Arizona, and Washington, had initiated

significant statewide distance education projects or designated certain institutions specifically to provide distance education. A sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure was developing in the West, but states' policies had not kept pace.

In addition, there was no agreement about the criteria that should be used in assessing distance education programs and no way to guarantee their quality. The regional accrediting associations continued to use outmoded criteria based on campus programs, and there was no agreement or coordination with state regulatory bodies in assessing distance education programs. Everyone recognized that, to be effective, standards on distance education must transcend both state and institutional boundaries.

Project Description

Following is a summary of the activities undertaken as part of this project.

1) **Documented current state regulations and practices related to degree programs delivered electronically from out-of-state educational institutions. We used a four-stage process to obtain this information**:

   1. We sent a written survey along with a request for documentation of current regulatory policies and the procedures for change.

   2. After analyzing all the materials we received, we identified specific issues in each state and developed a phone interview protocol.

   3. Staff interviewed key personnel in state higher education regulatory and governing offices for clarification on how and if the agency regulated programs delivered from out of state via telecommunications.

   4. Staff summarized the results of each phone interview and developed a framework for documenting the information.

   5. Results became the basis of a year-end report to FIPSE and a published document on the regulatory picture in the West: "When Distance Education Crosses State Lines: Western States' Policies." (A copy of each is included as Appendix ___.)

   Three themes emerged as we conducted this first phase of the project:

   - *The importance of accreditation*—This aspect of the project made clear the role that regional accreditation continues to play as a primary indicator of quality in state policies governing interstate program delivery. Many western states' policies rely on regional accreditation as the primary criterion for determining whether to approve an out-of-

state institution's proposal to offer degree programs within the state.

- *The need for tools to assess quality in distance-delivered programs.* Determination of quality in programs delivered electronically must expand the traditional definitions of quality for on-campus academic degree programs.

- *The value of distance education in increasing student access*—Quality academic degree programs delivered throughout the region via technology can promote resource savings and increase opportunities for access for students in the West.

2) **Developed standards for electronically delivered distance education programs.**

As we had anticipated, this was the most challenging aspect of the project. It was a long, slow process, in part because we were very earnest in our efforts to get as much review, comment, and agreement as possible from around the West. We used a consultative process and took a series of steps over an 18-month period:

- Winter, 1994—based on responses to the written surveys, staff developed a very preliminary list of categories to be included in the "principles."

- Spring, 1994—interviewed 46 people from state higher education agencies and public and private institutions, querying them on each of the categories in our preliminary list. Based on their responses, we developed an initial draft of "Principles."

- December, 1994—At an Advisory Board meeting, we spent considerable time discussion the "Principles" (at that point changed to "Characteristics"), adding and deleting categories, and refining language.

- January, 1995—Circulated a second draft to meeting attendees, other Advisory Board members, the accrediting community, and SHEEOS in the 15 western states. We then held conference calls with groups of four or five recipients.

- February-March, 1995—State higher education agencies circulated drafts of the "characteristics" to institutions in their states, asking for comments. The draft was also published in the Western Cooperative's regular publication, *Communiqué*, which is sent to 700 recipients. It was also posted to WICHE's gopher and several listservs. Staff discussed the merits of each suggestion received in response to this effort and made

appropriate changes.

- April, 1995—Set deadline for comments from higher education institutions. Made additional changes, the most significant of which was the addition of a Preamble to the "Characteristics."

- May, 1995—Finally, after receiving additional comments from around the West, staff made changes that seemed appropriate, and the "almost final" draft went again to the advisory committee. A May 10 call with the committee resulted in what we were ready to call a "final draft." Interestingly, the latest version included a return to our original notion of "Principles of Good Practice," instead of the "Characteristics..." we had been using for the past six months.

3) **Disseminated the "Principles of Good Practice" wide and gained their acceptance as the basis for assessing the quality of telecommunicated degree programs, both in the West and nationally.**

The implementation phase of the project turned out to be somewhat different from our proposed emphasis on securing state-level acceptance and adoption of the Principles as the basis for state agencies' review and approval of out-of-state programs. (See above, **Purpose,** for the reasons this happened.) Although we continued our efforts with the state regulatory agencies—especially in terms of getting the Principles to be used for the review of in-state programs—we also focused on getting the word out about the Principles of Good Practice , disseminating them widely through every means possible. In part, dissemination became the vehicle for pursuing our new emphasis on having the Principles emerge as the standard for discussions of quality in distance education both in the West and throughout the country.

Dissemination efforts:

- Widespread mailing and conference distribution of a one-page "brochure" on the Principles of Good Practice. Copies were disseminated to WICHE Commissioners, who hold key policy positions in the Western states; other regional higher organizations (Southern Regional Education Board, New England Board of Higher Education, Midwestern Higher Education Compact); meetings of the State Higher Education Executive Officers and State Higher Education Academic Officers; members of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications; presidents of National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges; and those involved in initiating the Western Governors University. (copy included in Appendix.).

- Published articles in the following:

  Change Magazine, March/April 1996: "The Virtual University: Principles of Good Practice." By Sally Johnstone and Barbara Krauth. (Copy included in appendix.)

  CAUSE/EFFECT, Spring 1996—"Principles of Good Practice for Distance Learning Programs." By Barbara Krauth . (Copy included in appendix.)

  The *North Central Association Newsletter*. Spring 1996. By Sally Johnstone.

  WICHE Policy Insight. April 1996. "Quality Assurance in Distance Education." By Robin Zuniga and Barbara Krauth. (Copy included in appendix.)

- Maintained close contact with the regional accrediting community's Distance Education Task Force and regional accrediting groups with oversight responsibility for institutions in the West. Recognizing the importance of accreditation to the issue of basic quality and the fact that the accrediting groups were poised to develop new approaches to distance education, we stayed in touch with their efforts.

- Made presentations at national distance education conferences, including:

  The Western Cooperative's Annual Meetings, 1995 and 1996

  North Central Association National Conference, 1996

  The International Distance Learning Conference, 1996

- Participated in a California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, national teleconference, "Quality Assessment in Distance Learning," Spring 1996.

- Contacted state higher education agencies and interviewed principal staff about the Principles and their likely use within the state. Offered appropriate support to state efforts at addressing interstate programs and quality issues.

- Contacted professional accrediting associations in fields ranging from nursing to libraries. The agencies were asked whether programs offered via distance learning technologies were addressed in their accreditation standards and whether distance

education was an issue for them.

- Contacted state higher education agencies and interviewed principal staff about the potential value of the Principles and their likely use within the state. Offered whatever support might be appropriate to state efforts at addressing interstate programs and quality issues.

4. Educated student consumers by producing two publications designed to help students know what they should expect from distance education programs they are considering.

These publications emerged as important in putting into place our understanding of the importance of educating consumers rather than relying on regulation to stop unscrupulous providers. The first, listed below, is a kind of beginner's guide to distance education and what to look for. The second offers a "Seal of Approval" approach, highlighting specific examples of good practice under each category of the Principles.

- *Distance Education: A Consumer's Guide. What Distance Learners Need to Know.* This brief publication helps a student considering fulfilling his/her goals through a program offered via telecommunications at a distance know what questions to ask of a potential provider and uses the Principles of Good Practice to guide such a student to appropriate quality-related considerations. (A copy is included in the Appendix.)

- *Good Practices in Distance Education.* Based on nominations from state higher education agencies, this document identifies a variety of good practices being implemented around the West by all types of program providers, both public and private. The publication is organized in terms of the Principles themselves, exemplary practices highlighted under each. (A copy is included in the Appendix.)

An interesting, very recent development is that California, whose rules governing out-of-state providers have for years been among the strictest in the West, is in the process of closing down its state licensing and regulatory agency. This move suggests that the wave of the future will be to focus on making students aware rather than attempting to regulate program providers.

Evaluation

Evaluation played an important part in the entire project. Following are some of the measures used to determine how we were doing during the course of the project and, now, at its completion. The advisory board performed a critical role in the ongoing evaluation of project activities. At various points, the advisory board was asked to evaluate progress to date and, based on what was learned, to work with project staff to

determine next steps. As the success of the project depended heavily on consensus building, such continuous review of "how are we doing" was especially important.

We established at the beginning several milestones to mark our degree of success in meeting the project's objectives. Our level of attainment for those milestones was as follows:

Milestones for Objectives 1: Documenting current state regulations—Milestones for Objective 1 met during the course of the project included convening meetings and completing all reports and publications.

Milestones for Objective 2: Developing standards for electronically delivered distance education programs. As discussed above, we succeeded through a widespread consultative process in doing this.

Milestone for Objective 3: Secure state-level acceptance and adoption of the agreed-on standards as the basis for state agencies' review and authorization of telecommunicated degree programs. Our original intention was to consider that we had achieved this objective if, by the end of the project, those in the fifteen states responsible for regulating interstate distance education programs were either using or planning to use the agreed-on "standards" to review programs coming from other states. However, as the rest of this report makes clear, that objective turned out to be less important than we had anticipated. Because the focus of most state regulatory agencies is, in fact, more on ensuring the quality of in-state that out-of-state programs, their use of the Principles of Good Practice as a quality standard to assess in-state programs is a more useful measure.

Using the Principles of Good Practice

The central accomplishment of the "Balancing Quality and Access" project was that, at its end, the Principles of Good Practice had become the basis for national agreement on the standards for education programs delivered via technology. State agencies, other regional higher education groups, and the regional accrediting community have endorsed them.

Within Western States

The following western states have incorporated the Principles of Good Practice into their review and approval processes for in-state programs:

- Arizona—approved by the chief academic officers of the state;

- Colorado—Colorado Commission on Higher Education approved in the context of Extended Studies.

- Idaho—Board of Education intends to use the Principles generally to help the state focus its distance education efforts.

- Montana—The Board of Regents adopted the Principles as policy for the Montana State University system and will use them in its statewide technology committee.

- New Mexico—The state's regulation on instructional funding cites the Principles of Good Practice., stating that "To be eligible for funding, all courses and programs must demonstrate academic quality, consistent with regional accrediting association expectations and guidelines, which are similar to the Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs.

- Oregon—The Strategic Plan of the Oregon Community Colleges for Distance Learning includes the Principles in a section entitled "Good Practices."

- South Dakota—The Board of Regents adopted the Principles.

- Washington—incorporated the Principles into its "Guidelines for Program Planning.

- The Western Legislators'Conference passed a resolution at a recent meeting encouraging Western states to consider adopting the Principles as the basis for in-state assessments.

- Western Governors University--Perhaps the most significant use of the Principles of Good Practice will be within the new Western Governors University. WGU will stipulate that all program providers whose courses and programs are to be listed in the WGU online catalog/adviser must certify their adherence to the Principles of Good Practice.

- **...And Beyond**

The **Southern Regional Education Board** adopted "Principles of Good Practice for Academic Degree and Certificate Programs that are Offered Electronically." These "Principles," which will be used to identify requirements for participation in SREB's Electronic Common Market, are only very slightly different in wording from the Principles developed through this project.

The **Regional Accrediting Associations' Task Force on Distance Learning** endorsed the Principles of Good Practice. In addition, all individual regional accrediting commissions have also endorsed the Principles; most have also included them in recent

versions of their handbooks are will use them in their reviews of distance-delivered programs:

North Central Association of Schools and Colleges
Western Association of Schools and Colleges—junior and senior divisions
Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Professional Accrediting Associations--Of 19 professional associations contacted, an overwhelming 17 agencies indicated that they were involved in efforts to improve their approach to evaluating distance learning programs in their fields. All requested additional information about the project, including copies of the Principles of Good Practice,. We anticipate, based on our conversations, that several of these groups will, in fact, also eventually adopt the Principles as the basis of their own language on standards.

The National Association of State Approving Agencies also adopted the Principles of Good Practice in principle.

Virtual College, a recent publication by Pam Dixon designed to accompany the **Peterson's Guide,** points to the usefulness of the Principles of Good Practice.

Milestones for Objective 4: Inform higher education institutions not directly involved in this project of the new standards and state requirements for delivering degree programs across state lines via telecommunications.— Again, as the project's focus changed, we altered our strategy after the second year to increasing awareness of the issue of quality in distance education and of the Principles themselves. Dissemination activities themselves are described above.

Although all scheduled activities were completed, the Western Cooperative staff's obligations to other activities, particularly the development of the Western Governors University, created some problems with timely completion.

To gauge our success at getting out the word, we also tracked the number and source of inquiries regarding the Principles of Good Practice. We received 67 requests for copies of the Principles of Good Practice. These requests, which continue to arrive, came from higher education institutions, research organizations, professional accrediting bodies, state departments of education, journal and newsletter editors, high schools, and individuals.

Many of those requesting information disseminated it further; others have incorporated "The Principles of Good Practice" into their own work. The University of New Mexico, for example, disseminated the Principles at a Best Practice Seminar for New Mexico and

University of North Carolina faculty. The Principles were also republished in several journals and newsletters, including *The Department Chair: A Newsletter for Academic Administrators*. They were the occasion of the first discussion ever to take place among academic officers of western institutions on the topic of quality in distance education.

Summary and Conclusion

The exploding growth of technology use in higher education makes it possible for learners to have easy access to education and training. When this project was conceived, there seemed to be regulatory barriers in place that limited such access from state to state. Both the course of the project itself and the rapid changes talking place in the environment surrounding distance education made such barriers less important than anticipated. What remained was a central concern about how to ensure quality in programs made available through technology.

The central achievement of the "Balancing Quality and Access" project has been in terms of the first part of that equation: quality. Concerns about quality in distance education programs focus on questions such as "Will students in "virtual" learning situations be isolated, with no semblance of human contact with their instructors? How can distant students receive good advising and academic support services? Can these students be confident that a program being offered through technology will be around long enough to enable them to complete the degree?

The "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs" offer—in a sense, for the first time---a tool for assessing the quality of distance learning programs in terms of these kinds of questions.

The Principles emerged from a Western regional perspective, but our original intention of reaching only the Western states was too modest. We conceived of the possible impact of distance education standards too narrowly, as the effect of the Principles of Good Practice is being seen far beyond the western states. We recognize that these Principles are not the final answer on the issue of quality, but they do provide a framework for developing the real policies that are now emerging from and reflecting a variety of specific environments. The "Balancing Quality and Access" project thus achieved an important goal by providing the basis for national agreement on what "quality" means in technologically delivered higher education.

Appendices

Information for FIPSE

1. What forms of assistance from FIPSE were helpful to you? How can FIPSE work effectively with projects?

The meeting with the FIPSE staff at the annual project directors meeting was useful, including the opportunity to discuss related projects. This meeting has also been useful in making contact with colleagues.

2. . What should the FIPSE staff consider in reviewing future proposals in your area of interest? What are emerging new directions? What are key considerations, given your type of project?

It might be useful for FIPSE to encourage inter-institutional programs in distance learning, including even projects for faculty in specific academic discplines to come together to plan electronically delivered programs.Helping faculty and institutions focus on electronically delivered outcomes-based programs seems to be a growing need.

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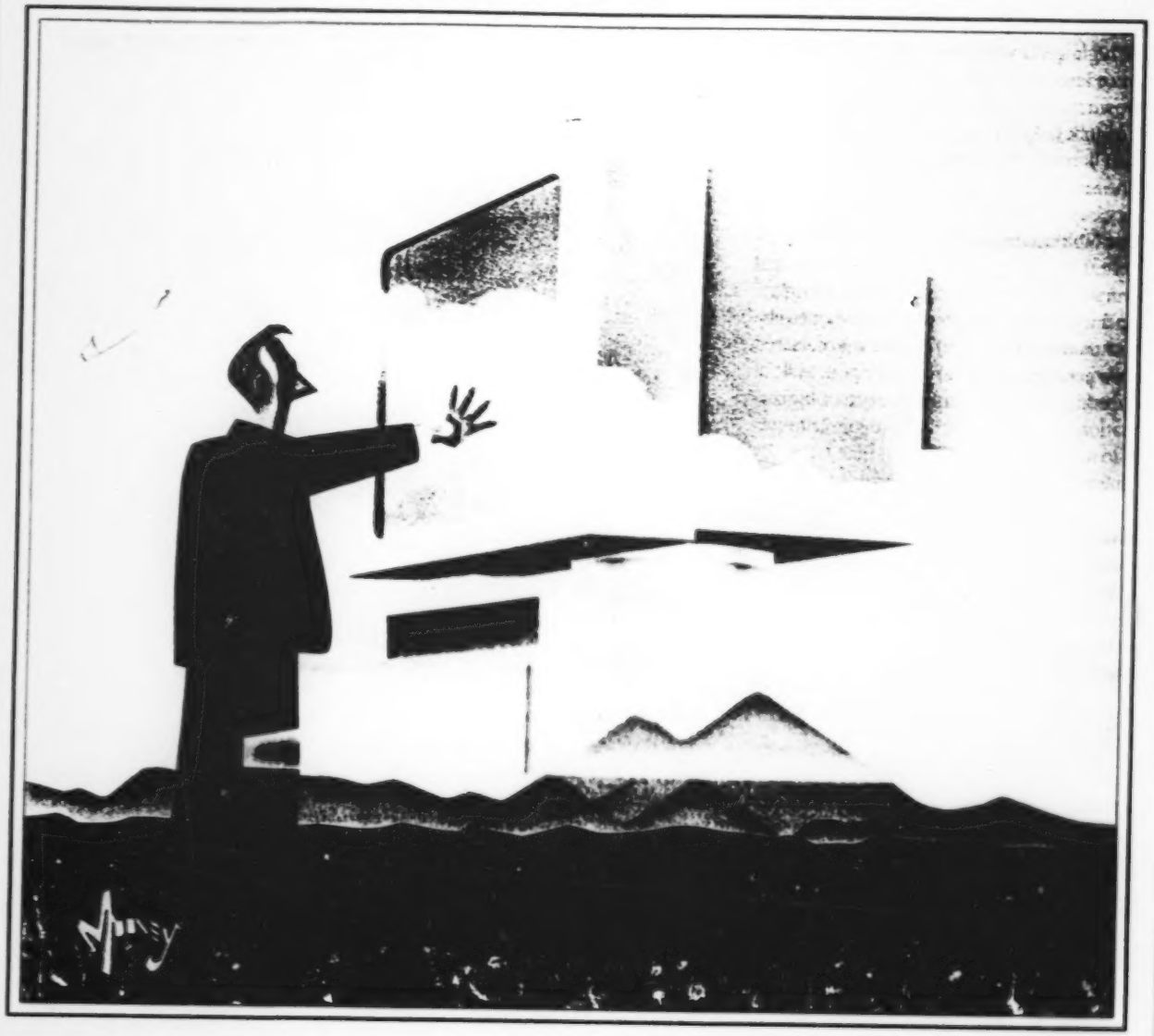

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Balancing Quality and Access

SOME PRINCIPLES *of* GOOD PRACTICE *for the* VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

BY SALLY M. JOHNSTONE AND BARBARA KRAUTH

Public, private, and proprietary institutions in the West have for years led the nation in providing distance-learning programs using technology. Because of the region's geography and demography—large stretches of land with widely dispersed populations—a number of Western states (including Alaska, Hawaii, North Dakota, and South Dakota) have over the past decade developed extensive telecommunications networks specifically to serve their citizens in outlying areas.

A projected increase in the need for higher education access throughout the region has recently heightened states' and institutions' interest in technology as a means to deliver higher education, both within and across state boundaries. Utah, for example, expects higher education enrollments to increase from 80,000 to 150,000 students in the next 12 years and is looking to technology to meet this demand. In addition, there is growing interest in expanding the availability of electronically delivered programs that serve the needs of working adults and employers.

At a meeting of the Western Governor's Association last December, the governors of 11 Western states took a revolutionary step on behalf of technology's potential to extend regional access to higher education programs by endorsing the notion of a "virtual university" to serve their region. The virtual university would provide courses through technology and award its own credentials. It would thus represent a radical approach to eliminating barriers to the interstate sharing of educational resources in the West.

The phenomenal growth of distance-learning programs—along with the possibility of a new virtual university—has increased concerns about how to ensure that higher education programs delivered via telecommunications are of good quality. The efficacy of technology itself is not in question; research and evaluation studies have consistently demonstrated that the achievement and satisfaction of students who learn via technology can equal those of students in regular classrooms. Instead, the focus is on surrounding issues, such as, Will students in "virtual" learning situations be isolated, with no semblance of human contact with their instructors? How can effective advising and academic support services be provided to distance-learning students? Will students in distance-learning degree programs have some guarantee that an electronically delivered program will continue to be supported long enough to enable them to complete the degree?

These and other concerns have been expressed repeatedly in recent years by 1) state higher education regulatory agencies, which are responsible for ensuring that citizens of their states have access to quality education; 2) regional higher education accrediting associations, which are only now beginning to address the need for standards that specifically address electronically delivered education; 3) higher education institutions, which are being pressured from within as technology and distance learning move from the fringes toward the center of the educational enterprise; and 4) prospective students, for whom the convenience of distance delivery is appealing, but who worry that the education they might receive via telecommunications will not be seen as equal to a traditionally delivered degree program.

A number of groups are now leading regional and national efforts to develop "standards" or "principles" to provide a common framework and language for addressing quality. These groups include the regional higher education accrediting associations' Task Force on Distance Learning and The Alliance, a group formed by the American Council on Education, as well as the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications at WICHE (the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education).

The Western Cooperative's "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs," now in final form, are based on research on state policies governing interstate program delivery and on extensive reviews, discussions, and comments by higher education leaders in the West. (See box on page 40.) The Principles of Good Practice are the most important outcome of the Western Cooperative's FIPSE-funded project, "Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education." During the project's final year, staff will work with state higher education agencies to help them incorporate the Principles into state policies.

The phenomenal growth of distance-learning programs—along with the possibility of a new virtual university—has increased concerns about how to ensure that higher education programs delivered via telecommunications are of good quality.

The Principles of Good Practice have so far been endorsed by the Colorado Commission of Higher Education, the South Dakota Board of Regents, the Montana University System, and the New Mexico Commission of Higher Education. In Alaska, the systemwide Academic Council plans to use the Principles in its Learning Cooperative rule book. Washington State is incorporating the Principles into its "Guidelines for Program Planning, Approval, and Review for Four-Year Public Institutions." In addition, the Western Legislators' Conference passed a resolution last October encouraging Western states to consider adopting the Principles as the basis for in-state assessments.

We recognize that these Principles—or any principles or even standards—are not the final answer on the issue of quality. They provide only a framework for developing the real policies that

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Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs

Preamble

These Principles are the product of a Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications project, "Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs." The three-year project, supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, is designed to foster an interstate environment that encourages the electronic provision of quality higher education programs across state lines. The Principles have been developed by a group representing the Western states' higher education regulating agencies, higher education institutions, and the regional accrediting community.

Recognizing that the context for learning in our society is undergoing profound changes, those charged with developing the Principles have tried not to tie them to, or compare them to, traditional campus structures. The Principles are also designed to be sufficiently flexible that institutions offering a range of programs—from graduate degrees to certificates—will find them useful.

Several assumptions form the basis for these Principles:

- The electronically offered program is provided by or through an institution that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting body.
- The institution's programs holding specialized accreditation meet the same requirements when offered electronically.
- The "institution" may be a traditional higher education institution, a consortium of such institutions, or another type of organization or entity.
- These Principles address programs rather than individual courses.
- It is the institution's responsibility to review educational programs it provides via technology in terms of its own internally applied definitions of these Principles.

Principles

Curriculum and Instruction

- Each program of study results in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded.
- An electronically offered degree or certificate program is coherent and complete.
- The program provides for appropriate real-time or delayed interaction between faculty and students and among students.
- Qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of the program electronically offered.

Institutional Context and Commitment to Role and Mission

- The program is consistent with the institution's role and mission.
- Review and approval processes ensure the appropriateness of the technology being used to meet the program's objectives.

Faculty Support

- The program provides faculty support services specifically related to teaching via an electronic system.
- The program provides training for faculty who teach via the use of technology.

Resources for Learning

- The program ensures that appropriate learning resources are available to students.

Students and Student Services

- The program provides students with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.
- Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning. Accepted students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.
- Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the program and the services available.

Commitment to Support

- Policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate consideration of teaching and scholarly activities related to electronically offered programs.
- The institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing support, both financial and technical, and to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable students to complete a degree/certificate.

Evaluation and Assessment

- The institution evaluates the program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction.
- Students have access to such program evaluation data.
- The institution provides for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at completion of the program.

must emerge from and reflect specific environments. We also know that it is impossible to regulate many types of electronically delivered education programs; there is no way to predict the location of a student studying over the Internet, for example. However much state regulatory agencies would like to control the operation of education that "takes place" within their boundaries, in reality they have no way to stop unscrupulous providers or those with poor-quality programs from offering such programs within their state.

Nevertheless, we believe that the Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs can be of genuine assistance in addressing the quality issue—not only in the West, but nationally. Up to now, there has been nothing to guide the review of electronically offered programs from any relevant perspective. That is, neither the state agency responsible for regulations, the regional accrediting community, institutions interested in developing programs for electronic delivery, nor—most importantly—students curious about the possibility of pursuing educational goals via telecommunications have had any way to judge the quality of programs offered via those technologies. We hope that, through widespread dissemination, discussion, and broad endorsement by the higher education community, the Principles of Good Practice can achieve the following significant benefits for all these groups.

- ***State higher education regulatory agencies and boards.*** State higher education offices in several Western states

have already committed themselves to using the Principles when reviewing electronically delivered programs proposed by in-state providers. We hope in the near future to see widespread agreement to follow this practice. The next step will be to encourage the development of reciprocal agreements whereby any receiving state could rely on a home state's review to ensure quality. Such agreements would, in turn, benefit program providers by ensuring that they would no longer have to meet the disparate requirements of 50 states' regulations.

• ***Regional accrediting associations.*** Accreditation is at present an important benchmark for educational quality. In 12 of the 15 WICHE states, for example, accreditation is the principal criterion for granting approval to an out-of-state institution interested in offering an education program within the state. It is therefore significant that the accrediting community has agreed to use the language of the Principles as the basis for standards being developed to address distance learning. As of last December, the boards of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions and the junior college division of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges have specifically endorsed the Principles.

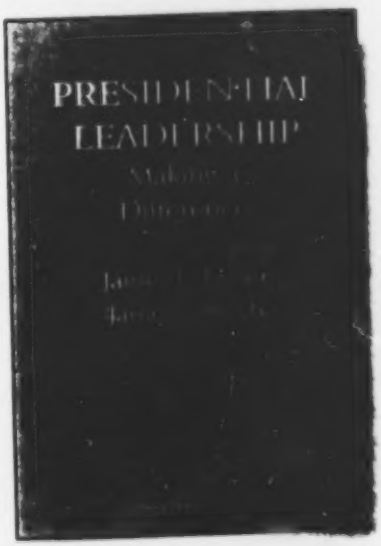
• ***Higher education institutions.*** As colleges and universities move to make programs available beyond their campuses, they are being pressured both by external and internal forces to rethink the role of technology and to develop policies that address issues such as instructional design, faculty-student interaction, and student support services. While the Principles do not in themselves constitute policy, they identify the areas that are crucial to address in policy development. In essence, the Principles offer institutions the basic guidelines for self-regulation. Moreover, for proprietary schools, the Principles offer a way to achieve a kind of "seal of approval." Schools that can demonstrate how the Principles are implemented in their programs will be able to advertise this fact and to attract students on this basis.

• ***Prospective students.*** Empowering the learner is, finally, the only real way to ensure quality in higher education programs delivered via technology. In this regard, the Principles are intended to help prospective students identify what questions to ask of provider institutions. It will be up to students to ask these questions and to make sure they are satisfied with the answers. Recognizing the importance of empowering students, the Western Cooperative will also develop and disseminate a brochure that highlights the Principles as well as another publication containing case studies of the approaches taken by a variety of institutions in implementing the Principles in a range of educational programs. The Principles of Good Practice are an important starting point in ensuring students that educational programming delivered to their homes and work places is of the quality they are entitled to expect.

We believe that the Principles of Good Practice can be of genuine assistance in addressing the quality issue—not only in the West, but nationally.

The Principles of Good Practice emerged from a Western regional project and are beginning to take hold in Western states. Whatever form a virtual university of the West might take in order to provide educational access throughout that region, we anticipate that the Principles are likely to be part of its policies. Notwithstanding their regional origins, however, we believe that the Principles of Good Practice may become the basis for national agreement on the standards for programs offered electronically. It now seems possible that they may eventually provide—in most cases, for the first time—a basis for assessing the quality of electronically offered programs.

For Leaders in the 21st Century



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Barbara Krauth
(barbkrauth@wiche.edu) is a Research Assistant at WICHE and is involved in the Balancing Quality and Access program of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications.

Principles of Good Practice for Distance Learning Programs

by Barbara Krauth

The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), a program of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), is at the forefront of a growing movement to develop guidelines for evaluating distance learning programs. The Western Cooperative's project, Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education,[1] is only one of several efforts under way to develop "standards" or "principles" for higher education programs delivered via telecommunications. The project's overall goal is to encourage the interstate delivery of high quality education programs via electronic means to students in the Western states. At its heart are two questions: what does "quality" mean, and how can it be addressed?

The quality question is being asked by a variety of interested parties, for up to now there has been nothing to guide the review of electronically offered programs from any relevant perspective. That is, neither state agencies responsible for approving higher education programs, the regional accrediting associations, institutions involved in developing programs for delivery at a distance, nor students curious about whether they might pursue their educational goals via telecommunications have had any way to judge the quality of programs delivered by technology.

A number of regional and national organizations are now involved in efforts to develop standards for distance learning programs. These groups include the regional higher education accrediting associations' Task Force on Distance Learning and The Alliance, a group formed by the American Council on Education. The efficacy of learning by means of technology is not itself being questioned in these current efforts. Research and evaluation studies put that issue to rest long ago. Instead, the quality concern focuses on issues related to student support and to program integrity: Will students in "virtual" learning situations be isolated, with no semblance of human contact with their instructors or other students? How can effective advising and academic support services be made available to distance learning students? How can students in such programs be sure that their learning experiences will equal those on campuses and that their degrees will be seen as equivalent to a traditionally delivered degree program?

Regional accrediting associations, too, are at last beginning to acknowledge that traditional means of evaluating an institution's services must be revised when looking at programs delivered off campus. The number of books in the library is no longer the relevant issue, for example. Rather, what is important is whether and which technological means are available to assist students at a distance or in rural areas in accessing information resources.

The WCET's Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs are based on: (1) research on states' policies for reviewing and approving higher education programs proposed for offering by out-of-state institutions, and (2) extensive reviews, discussions, and comments by higher education leaders in the West.

We recognize that these Principles—or any principles or standards, for that matter—are not the final answer on the issue of quality. They provide only an initial framework for developing the real policies that must emerge from and reflect specific environments. We also know that the Principles cannot help state agencies to regulate many of the programs delivered across state lines via telecommunications. There is no real way to predict, for example, the location of a student studying over the Internet. However much state regulatory agencies would like to control the operation of education that "takes place" within their boundaries, in reality they have no way to stop unscrupulous providers from offering such programs within their state.

Nevertheless, we believe that the Principles of Good Practice can be of genuine assistance in addressing the quality issue. Through widespread dissemination, discussion, and broad endorsement by the higher education community, the Principles of Good Practice can benefit a variety of constituents:

[1] This project is supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).

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+ An electronically offered degree or certificate program is coherent and complete.
+ The program provides for appropriate real-time or delayed interaction between faculty and students and among students.
+ Qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of the program electronically offered.

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+ Accepted students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.
+ Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the program and the services available.

Commitment to Support

+ Policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate consideration of teaching and scholarly activities related to electronically offered programs.
+ The institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing support, both financial and technical, and to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable students to complete a degree/certificate.

Evaluation and Assessment

+ The institution evaluates the program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction. Students have access to such program evaluation data.
+ The institution provides for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at completion of the program.

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"While they do not in themselves constitute policy, the Principles identify the areas that are crucial to address in policy development."

When Distance Education Crosses State Boundaries: Western States' Policies 1995 summarizes the western states' policies and regulations governing higher education programs electronically delivered across state lines. The booklet is available from WCET through WICHE Publications ($9.00 postage paid). To order, call 303-541-0290 and ask for publication #2A260.

Higher education institutions. The Principles can support the efforts of colleges and universities interested in developing and providing quality distance learning programs. By communicating some guidelines to enable such institutions to gauge their own degree of success, the Principles of Good Practice can provide a useful tool for institutions' self-assessment. While they do not in themselves constitute policy, the Principles identify the areas that are crucial to address in policy development. The Principles might also eventually serve as a kind of "Seal of Approval," enabling private, for-profit program providers to advertise their efforts to meet quality standards.

The regional accrediting associations. The accrediting associations' Task Force on Distance Education has agreed to use the language of the Principles as the basis for standards being developed to address distance learning. As of this writing, the boards of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions and the junior college division of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges have adopted the Principles exactly as written for inclusion in their handbooks for accreditation.

State higher education regulatory agencies and boards. Higher education offices in several Western states have committed themselves to using the Principles in their review of electronically delivered programs proposed by in-state colleges and universities. (States that have so far agreed to this policy include Alaska, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and South Dakota.) In addition, the Western Legislators' Conference passed a resolution encouraging all Western states to consider adopting the Principles as the basis for in-state assessments. The next step in WICHE's project is to encourage the development of reciprocal agreements whereby any "receiving" state could rely on a home state's review to ensure that the proposed program meets the Principles of Good Practice. Such agreements would in turn benefit program providers by ensuring that they would no longer have to meet the disparate requirements of fifty states' regulations.

Prospective students. Empowering the learner is, finally, the only real way to ensure that higher education programs delivered via technology are of high quality. In this regard, the Principles can help prospective students identify the questions to ask of provider institutions. It will be up to students to ask these questions and to make sure they get satisfactory answers. Staff of the Balancing Quality and Access project are developing brochures on distance learning and the Principles of Good Practice to help students understand how to ensure that educational programming delivered to their homes and work places conveys the quality they are entitled to expect.

It now seems possible that the Principles of Good Practice may become the basis for national agreement on the standards for education programs delivered via technology. If so, they will eventually provide—in most cases, for the first time—a basis for assessing the quality of electronically offered programs.

Future Perfect...

(continued from page 3)

We need to demonstrate to our presidents that we know how to consolidate our economic gains and change the ways of doing business to benefit from the constantly improving technology available to us. The lesson to learn is that while technological change is constant, our implementation of technology is discrete, although ongoing. We must not let the constancy of technological change blind our ability to consolidate our productivity gains by modifying our personal and institutional behavior.

One of the best pieces of advice I have ever received was to understand that "life is what is happening while you're busy making other plans." We have incorporated much of our networked information technology into our daily lives already. There are presentations that I prepare in hours and days with information that would have taken weeks to obtain without today's networked information—and the information is more current and up to date. Electronic journals abound. And the Web gives me more digitized graphics and photos than I thought, as recently as two years ago, would be commonly available by now.

However, we still have scholarly journals increasing in price in some science and medical fields at 15–18 percent per year at a time of 2–3 percent inflation. The price of scholarly information in general has increased more than inflation. The technology is exciting and being incorporated into our daily activities, but our organizational and economic policy issues persist. To help our executive leadership we need to be vigilant and aggressive in identifying the barriers to changing our personal and institutional behavior to "advance productivity." If we do that successfully, the investment and support we are seeking for our future perfect world of networked information will come quite automatically.